

The Inevitable Oscar: Surface and Depth in *Dorian Gray* by the ineluctable Alfred J. Drake

Wilde's novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is just the sort of book that made Victorian England shiver. This decadent masterpiece is anything but a vehicle for the propagation of middle-class morality. We have in Wilde the ultimate aesthete, a disciple of Walter Pater, a dandy who in his personal life seems to have lived out Pater's quiet injunction to "burn with that hard, gemlike flame" in experiencing art and, no doubt, other things. How could Wilde's book, given its affinities with the age's "decadent manifestoes"--Stéphane Mallarmé's symbolist poetry, Huysmans' *À Rebours* (*Against Nature*), Aubrey Beardsley's drawings, *The Yellow Book*, and so on--serve as a cultural critique every bit as scathing, and perhaps more acute, than those of Carlyle, Ruskin, and Arnold? I suggest that Wilde accomplishes this task by making his characters enact the philosophy with which he himself was nearly synonymous and, in the same gesture, connecting this very philosophy with the logic of capitalistic exploitation that underlay the aristocratic façade of *Dorian's* England. By Wilde's time, the aristocracy could do little more than serve the capital-owning class as a kind of enhanced mirror image of its own behavior. The worst tendencies of Wilde's wealthy characters are none other than the selfishness, isolation, exploitation, and brutality that made the most perspicuous Victorians condemn capital. In Wilde's aristocracy, we see rich, idle, and decadent characters reveal from their loungechair and clubroom perspective the worst flaws in the system upon which they are parasitic. They are the dressed-up doubles, the insignificant others, of Britain's industrial class. Grown refined and idle, Wilde's aristocrats are free to expose, both in their words and deeds, the "sins" of the money-making Mammonists.

Let's try to draw out the element of cultural criticism, then, in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. If we wanted to pursue a moralistic, depressingly middle-class reading, we might think of this novel as having the structure of a tragedy. In a tragic play, of course, the hero commits some intellectual or spiritual error that leads to his destruction. Once the error is committed, the consequences play themselves out inexorably, and the only thing the hero ("protagonist") can do of value is *recognize* the mistake he has made and the necessity of the bad effects that follow from it. If he should fail to do so, we wind up with a moral comedy. For example, Christopher Marlowe's Doctor Faustus never comes to grips with the sinfulness of the pact he has made with the devil, and so as the play progresses, he begins to look more like a "stage villain" than a tragic hero--even if Faustus understands that he is doing evil, the playwright makes him constantly, and perhaps consciously, commit the same mistake over and over again until he is justly caught and punished. It is difficult to sympathize with such a depraved character. At the simplest level--the plot--*The Picture of Dorian Gray* surely follows this moralistic scheme. Each time Dorian sees the bad effects--on others as well as himself--of his prideful, arrogant behavior, his "solution" to the problem is not to repent permanently but instead to go off and do something even more depraved. The whole episode with actress Sibyl Vane shows the moralist reader that Dorian isolates himself, hardens himself, into little more than a stage villain rather early in the novel. As for his very last act--his attempt to stab the picture that mirrors his sins--that, the same reader would say, is no more than a sordid attempt literally to "kill" his conscience so that he will not feel remorse for what he has done. To our moralist's satisfaction, the attempt fails.

If we want to get beyond this *bourgeois* reading, however, we must examine the quality of the "error" that Dorian Gray commits. Since Dorian falls into this error with a little help from his friends, we should first examine those friends and their relation to him. First of all, there is the delightfully decadent Lord Henry Wotton. This aristocratic epigram-pusher and society wit acts a good deal like Oscar Wilde at a London dinner party and talks a good deal like Walter Pater, though we must make allowances for the latter's bashful, philosophical way of stating the most outrageous things. Lord Harry likes to live vicariously, it seems; while he lives the more or less respectable life of a British aristocrat and man of means, his present respectability as

a social animal does nothing to keep him from experimenting, Pater-like (yet in a way that surely would have horrified Pater himself), on the passions of others. Perhaps understanding well the dangers of actually *living* the dandyist, amoral philosophy he peddles, Harry treats Dorian as a kind of lab animal upon which to perform his nefarious experiments. In Lord Harry, we see a master of spiritual corruption at work.

It is a likely wager, nonetheless, that most of us rather like old Harry in spite of our own still-Victorian sensibilities. Why should that be so? Probably not entirely because he is a successful villain (though that's part of it, no doubt). It is more likely that we admire him because he is so very *accurate* in his judgments of the world around him. Unfortunately, the same witty epigrams that fill the empty container Dorian and lead him to ruin actually reflect the behavior and institutions of Britain. When Harry sneers at sincerity, marriage and politics, that is, he turns out more often than not to be describing Victoria's England to a tee. When Wilde sets a Paterian philosopher down into the world of his novel, we need not think that he is personally indicting his old professor at Oxford; rather, the same aesthetic, aloof way of analyzing an art work that Walter Pater prescribes in *The Renaissance* functions as a powerful means with which to describe and even to dismiss the most sanctified Victorian institutions and beliefs: work, honesty, fidelity, chastity, charity, progress, and so on. Perhaps it is just as well that Harry does away with these things with a wave of his hand at the dinner table, Wilde might say, because no one else in Britain has done anything but pay lip service to them for some time, if they ever did otherwise. How can we not admire such a virtuoso performance? We get to watch an old pro (an insider because his own values come from the very culture he criticizes) thoroughly fleece a pack of scoundrels--the Victorian middle and upper class. Besides, there was no need to worry that *The Picture of Dorian Gray* would be condemned because it was a reflection on *Victorian* morals generally--as Harry says, "Our countrymen never recognize a description" (232). Keep in mind, however, that even if we are bound to admire Harry's performance, we cannot identify with his perspective entirely. I shall point out below that while Lord Harry may serve as Wilde's proxy when he dismisses the vulgar middle class with a disdainful wave of his hand, his Nietzschean "looking down" upon the bourgeoisie is ultimately an illusion, a perspectival trick on Wilde's part.

As for Basil Hallward the artist, what share does he have in Dorian's downfall? It seems that while Basil strives after impersonality and aesthetic perfection in his work, he feels the greatest anxiety over having put "too much of himself" into his picture of Dorian. What does this mean, aside from Basil's fear of being labeled a Romantic expressivist? Perhaps it means a few things. Firstly, we should not leave aside the probability that Hallward's fear has something to do with an homosexual attachment to the young Dorian. It may be that Wilde here is commenting on the enforced "doubleness" and secret quality of homosexuals' lives in the late nineteenth century. To *display* his work of art in public would, in a sense, amount to exposure of Basil's attraction to Dorian Gray. But there is another meaning we must consider; without meaning to criticize homosexuality at all, we might say that within the context of the novel, Basil's attachment to Dorian amounts to a kind of narcissism. (Narcissus, by the way, was a Greek youth who fell in love with his own reflection in a pool of water and repined until he died.) It is as if Basil sees himself in the youth Dorian, as if he worships youth itself, embodied in the physical "beauty" of Dorian Gray. Idolatrously, then, Basil paints his own reflection, Dorian, in hopes of transfiguring him into a beautiful, ageless work of art. In effect, he has turned Dorian into a picture, has objectified him.

Basil's obsession with his friend's appearance has consequences, and this brings us to our examination of Dorian Gray himself. When Lord Harry tells him that the only thing worth living for is youth, Dorian, prepared by Basil's idolatry of him, falls in love with his own image, his own youth. And why should he not? we might ask. At the novel's outset, Dorian is little more than an empty container, almost a *tabula rasa* aristocrat (though one must admit he has a little bad blood from his mother's side--but then, all fine samples of aristocracy have that; it's a minimum requirement for entrance into the best clubs). Essentially, Dorian is

going to become what others make of him. At Lord Harry's prompting, the young narcissist will live only for experience's sake and try to shun the effects of his actions. In a way that would certainly have shocked the well-mannered Oxford Professor Pater, Dorian will narrow the whole world into the *empty* chamber of his mind, whatever the consequences. He will live his life as a work of art, seeking only hard, gemlike pleasure (not happiness!) and, ultimately, forgetfulness of the misery his own selfishness has caused other human beings.

Dorian will not, as I have already mentioned, succeed in forgetting his sins. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is by no means, however, the kind of "moral" book that any self-satisfied Victorian would have been happy to own. The "sins" for which aristocratic Dorian dies should, to the sharp observer, look a great deal like the everyday transactions of the commodity culture in which Wilde himself lived and wrote. The whole sorry affair with Sibyl Vane should be enough to convince any reader that Dorian's valuation of others follows much the same fetishistic logic that Marx outlines in the chapter from *Capital* that we have read. Sibyl, a working-class girl, "labors" on the stage to please her "Prince Charming," but that same Prince Charming values not her labor but instead her "fantastic" embodiment of a Juliet, Rosalind, or Imogen. The same heartless behavior on Dorian's part well shows the exclusionary tendencies of capital and class relations in Britain. For both Lord Harry and Dorian, Sibyl is no more than a puppet in a show put on for their amusement. Indeed, perhaps there is no need to go beneath the surface of Wilde's book to see what is most important; Chapter Eleven places Dorian's worship of mere objects right on the table for anyone to examine. In this chapter, Dorian, after hardening himself against feeling any responsibility for Sibyl's death, indulges himself for whole years in fondling and fetishizing various expensive objects--tapestries, gems, and the like, gathered in good imperialist fashion from the four corners of the globe. Surely Wilde is using Dorian's treatment of objects as a figure for the way he treats human beings, from whom he is separated by the abyss of his own selfishness. Since Dorian is never much more than an empty container, largely filled up, or determined, by the values of the culture in which Wilde has immersed him, does it not follow that his behavior and punishment also indict the culture that has "produced" him? By the end of Wilde's novel, Basil the artist is dead, killed by Dorian, but that need not be taken to imply that Wilde considers art useless. Dorian's transgressions are those of an entire class, which in turn stands in for an entire economic order, an order that is not, of course, limited to the aristocracy. Ultimately, Wilde's novel concerns a sphere wide enough to encompass and criticize both the elegant circles within which Dorian and Lord Harry move and the grimy contours of Manchester. When all is said, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is still with us to expose the "sins" of Victorian Britain.